



IN THE SHADOW  
OF THE SACRED

TODD  
MATSON

2003 CHAPBOOK  
SCARS PUBLICATIONS

# A FEW SMALL CHANGES

give me a few small changes

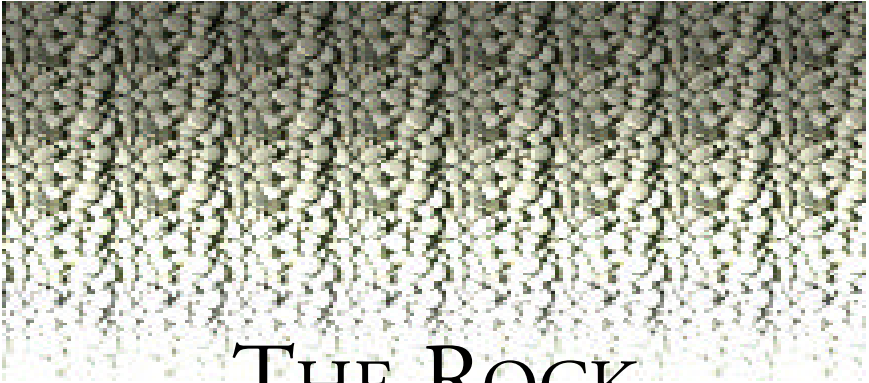
do away with the dogmatic  
fundamentalistic legalism  
the hell, fire and brimstone  
preaching and pulpit pounding  
perpetrated passionately and  
perpetually upon the people

empty the pews of all who  
surrender their minds on the  
altar beneath the preacher as  
a sweet smelling sacrifice to a  
deity who is understood to  
require the sacrifice of mind  
for the sake of heart and soul

dismiss from sunday school  
all the faithful lemmings who  
have committed mass intellectual  
suicide as a litmus test of faith  
and remain blissfully unaware  
of having ever done so and  
who now clog up the church  
with mindless platitudes  
laced with passionately held  
prejudices and bigotries

the same lemmings who  
cluster into cliques which  
exclude anyone who  
does not spout the same  
dogma with the same mindless  
sentimentalism and pride

and i believe i could go there



# THE ROCK

he fixed his eyes  
as if in a trance  
on the stained glass window  
which caught the light of the sun  
miraculously transformed it  
into all the colors of the rainbow  
reflected it like a kaleidoscope  
into the waters of baptism  
where his parents died  
and came to life again  
before he was born

he fixed his heart  
as if in a trance  
on images of loving arms  
cradling and embracing him  
as he was told they did  
after he was born  
and he could still hear  
the voices singing  
hymns and lullabies  
rock-a-byes harmonizing  
with songs celebrating  
the rock of salvation  
and he could still remember  
what it was like to feel safe

he fixed his mind  
as if in a trance  
on memory traces of  
his mother, his father, himself  
being included as members  
of a family of many members  
before he was immersed  
in the waters of many colors  
before his parents divorced  
before his mother, his father, himself  
were cast out from among them

he fixed his hands  
as if in a trance  
on the only thing he had left  
the rock of salvation  
as he came to know it  
and with all his might  
he cast the rock  
through a certain  
stained glass window

# THE CUSTODIAN

he kept the church clean in keeping  
with his job description as custodian  
which would have been fine had he  
limited his role to that of cleaning  
the church facilities but being a  
conscientious and meticulous  
custodian he went the extra mile  
by taking it upon himself to serve as  
custodian of the souls of the boys  
who trafficked in and out of the church

this dark-eyed, dark-haired, heavy-set  
middle-aged man who walked with a limp  
talked with a hiss and a perpetual frown  
and for whom an immaculate church was  
no more satisfying than a shot of whiskey  
in the hand of a chronic hard-core alcoholic  
was committed to cleaning up the filthy  
mouths and minds of the filthy boys who  
tracked their filthy feet on his clean carpets  
before his watchful eyes and listening ears

“You there” he would say with disgust  
“Come here” he would say with disdain  
and down a flight of stairs he and his  
pitiful prey would descend until they  
arrived at the door of the furnace room  
where local legend had it that he kept a  
two-by-four which he frequently used  
as a “rod of correction” on little boys who  
were in his judgement sufficiently filthy  
to require custodial services to which the  
little brats were apparently unaccustomed

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” he would say  
as he appointed himself custodial parent  
of a very frightened and vulnerable little boy  
down in that dark, dirty, dingy, dungeon  
where the slamming of the door sounded  
like the slamming of the gates of hell  
“Bend over and prepare to see God!”  
he would say with a tone of contempt

and when he said this to me in that  
most unholy of unholy places i did  
see God . . . when my father opened  
the door of the furnace room and said  
to that limping lump of human garbage  
“Get the hell away from my boy!”

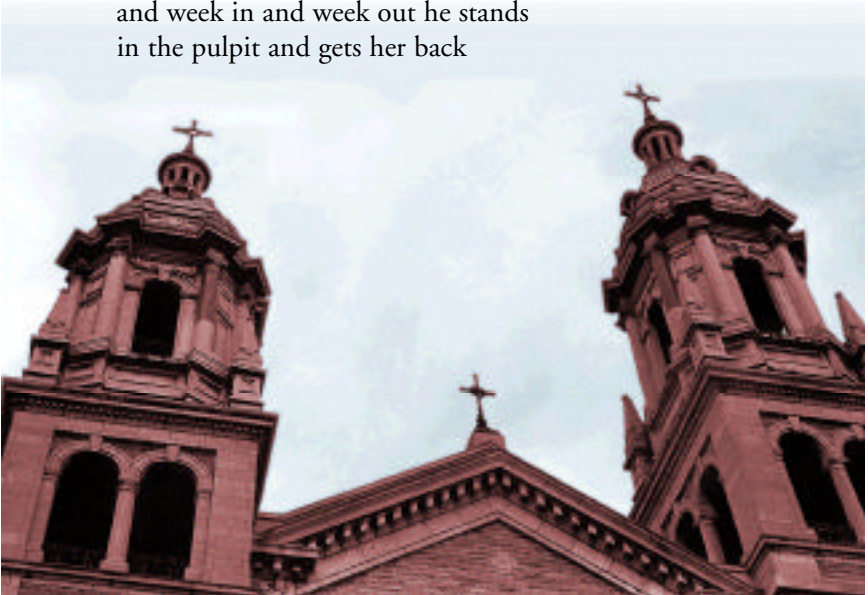
# TRIVIAL PURSUIT

as a youth struggling with  
drugs, dating, drinking, driving  
what i remember most about  
going to youth meetings . . .  
the sheer volume of time  
spent in pursuit of answers  
to whether Numbers came after  
Leviticus or Deuteronomy  
or whether Ezra came before  
Nehemiah or 1st & 2nd Chronicles

while we were at risk of losing  
our virginity, minds and lives  
our youth leaders were busy  
saving our souls with the  
trivial pursuit of trivia

# PASTOR-PARISH RELATIONS

they have an interesting relationship  
he allows her to use him all week long  
milk him for every ounce of energy  
exploit him for every iota of creativity  
criticize him for every perceived imperfection  
forget him when he is not at her service  
he allows her to do this week in and week out  
and week in and week out he stands  
in the pulpit and gets her back



# ASH WEDNESDAY

on ash wednesday  
after worship  
after the ashes were  
spread on her head  
on her whitebread head  
spread on her face  
on her milky white face  
the snowy white lady  
dressed in vanilla  
from head to toe  
asked the pastor  
whose ashes they were  
presuming the ashes  
must indeed have come  
from the cremated remains  
of someone  
and the pastor  
at a loss for words  
with which to answer  
a question as morbid  
as conspicuous as this  
told her, no one . . .  
the ashes came from  
no one . . .  
but hindsight is hell  
on the eyes  
and you know what  
he would say to her  
had she not died?  
had he had it  
to say to her  
over again?  
a black man . . .  
the ashes came from  
a black man . . .



# ETHNICITIS

there was once a church  
bursting at the seams  
with young, devoted  
passionate white people  
who would do almost anything  
to bring people in  
she was once a city on a hill  
an island of love  
peace, joy, hope, grace  
in a sea of human need  
but that was before the sea  
began teeming with racial diversity  
before she began to kill  
her pastors and prophets  
who dared to speak  
of lowering the nets  
for anyone in need  
regardless of race  
and now she is an aging  
dwindling, pathetic lot  
of white terminally ill castaways  
surrounded by a sea of people of color  
pseudo-sanctified white supremacists  
dressed in their Sunday best  
with stereotypes and bigotries  
glorified and baptized  
many years ago  
in their own little  
harbor of hatred  
she is a sick caricature of Atlantis  
a lost city  
blind to the rainbow embracing her  
a lost city  
sinking into the sea

# THE LONGEST BRIDGE IN THE WORLD

in the twin cities there is a bridge  
which continues to join  
the twin cities together  
for years, for decades  
the kids in middle school  
on the side of the river  
populated by white people  
referred to the bridge as  
the longest bridge in the world  
because it stretched from  
the United States of America  
all the way to Africa  
when i was in middle school  
i remember riding my bike  
over that bridge  
as a sort of rite of passage  
from innocence to prejudice  
wanting it known to all  
that i rode my bike over  
the longest bridge in the world  
and when i arrived  
on the side of the river  
populated by black people  
what struck me like lightning  
were the numbers of steeples  
atop black churches  
stretching high into the heavens  
with crosses atop the steeples  
stretching out even higher

almost appearing to get lost up there  
like lightning itself  
which joins the heavens to earth  
and it struck me that  
the longest bridge in the world  
is not horizontal  
the longest bridge in the world  
is vertical  
it starts in heaven  
and stretches all the way down to earth  
with enough love  
to bridge the hearts  
of people of every color  
and from that day forward  
i knew the truth about bridges  
the shortest bridge in the world  
is always the one between you and me  
if only one of us will cross over



# ROYAL CENTER OF FRIENDLINESS

when we first came to Royal Center  
a small town amidst the cornfields  
in the heartland of America  
we drove past a sign which reads  
Welcome to the Royal Center  
of Friendliness  
and we noticed the natives  
greeting one another most kindly  
at the post office, at the barber shop  
at the gas station, at the grocery store  
on the steps of the churches  
wherever two or three were gathered  
we noticed a red carpet of friendliness  
There is not much to see in a small town  
but what you hear makes up for it  
a slogan reads at the local diner  
where the townsfolk serve as a  
friendly little grapevine  
and for those who have  
blood kin among the natives  
Royal Center is most certainly  
the royal center of friendliness  
but for those who are  
thinking about moving in  
from somewhere, anywhere else  
it may be a good idea  
to drive through town once  
all the way through town  
out past the town limit

out to the cornfields  
to see the other sign  
it is well worth the drive  
to see the other sign  
a rusty sign with colors faded  
a dented, twisted, crooked sign  
a relic somehow still standing  
like a scarecrow in a cornfield  
like a corpse on life support  
like a skeleton on a respirator  
before moving to Royal Center  
take just a moment to  
read between the lines  
of that old artifact  
Get US Out of the  
United Nations!

# WHEN THE SHEEP CRY WOLF

have you ever noticed that  
when the sheep cry wolf  
an ecclesiastical hierarchy  
of hearing impaired clerics  
circle their wagons and  
maintain a conspiracy of silence  
which is broken only by a verdict  
that the sheep are only crying wolf?

have you ever noticed that  
this has been going on for  
generations and centuries  
and centuries of generations?

have you ever noticed how  
the hearing of the ecclesiastical  
hierarchy of clerics miraculously  
improves when the sheep cry wolf  
through lawyers who are ready  
to help them hunt down the wolves  
and plunder the coffers of the church?

# SCARECROW

in a cloak as black as  
the wings of a crow  
he preached a steady diet  
of death and damnation  
only because he wanted to  
scare the hell out of  
the children and youth  
who might still choose  
to go their own way  
scare the devil out of  
the college and careers  
crowd who might choose  
to drop out of sunday school  
scare up some new converts  
but all the straw man did was  
scare a generation out of church

# MORE THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS

he has mama's eyes, papa's nose  
mama's heart, papa's brain  
mama's ability to be  
empathic, nurturing, close  
papa's ability to be  
analytical, disengaged, distant  
he has grandma's hypochondriasis  
those obsessive thoughts that  
his temperature may be elevated  
the lump under his skin may be malignant  
he has grandpa's boxing gloves and killer instinct  
those old relics from grandpa's childhood and his own  
which display their felt need to defend themselves  
on the playgrounds and battlegrounds of life  
he has uncle's agnostic tendencies  
his loathing of televangelists who guilt  
old ladies out of their social security  
in the name of God  
he has uncle's uncanny sense  
to hate the right things  
about institutional religion  
he has uncle's knack for quiet rebellion  
his love for the Salvation Army  
he has mama's capacity to care  
display affection, fight back tears  
he has papa's iron will  
to finish what has been started  
as well as his tendency to brood  
to throw temper tantrums



he has grandma's insecurity  
love of children, belief in an afterlife  
he has grandpa's inability  
to let the arrow fly  
through the heart of a deer  
caught in the crosshairs  
he has uncle's keen sense of moral irony  
he is a patchwork of the  
physical, psychological, spiritual  
anatomy of his ancestors  
living and dead  
a sort of walking, talking bundle  
of recycled parts of imperfect people  
who donated organs  
from which he has been made  
people he craves to understand  
as he frantically struggles  
to make sense of the  
meaning of his own existence  
childhood has a way of making  
Frankensteins of us all

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